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## A SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL IN TIME OF WAR IMPRESSIONS OF MARTIAL AND DRAMATIC ENTHUSIASM IN STRATFORD WHEN THE EUROPEAN WAR BROKE OUT

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CLARENCE STRATTON  
Central High School, St. Louis, Missouri

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In Cologne the news that Russia would fight Austria and that Germany must ally herself with the latter was enthusiastically received, and the cafés that night were crowded with perspiring stein-shifters who shouted themselves hoarse in “Die Wacht am Rhein.” During the next week Belgium began to mobilize for what we regarded then as a comic-opera war, yet Brussels was as gay as ever. Only later did any misgivings assail me as I tried to secure in all the offices a stateroom on the steamer for which we had passage from Hook of Holland to Harwich, and was repeatedly advised to get it on the boat. The misgivings became apprehensions as I waited in vain on the station platform in Rotterdam for through boat trains from Berlin and Cologne, and was finally sent down in a special made up along the Dutch Railway. On the boat there were over a thousand passengers; that was her last *regular* night crossing. We steamed down between long lines of dark-gray cruisers and destroyers; matters were looking serious.

They were more so in London next morning. Crowds were besieging banks and express offices, tourists were demanding gold and being assured that only a prescribed percentage could be supplied. We needed only a little, and left at once for the Shakespeare

festival at Stratford-on-Avon. (Incidentally, I left my overcoat in a London taxicab, resulting in so much official correspondence with Scotland Yard that I was suspected of being a secret service man. But, as Kipling remarks, that's another story.)

It was August 1. Quiet little Stratford was buzzing with two intense feelings—one the Shakespeare festival; the other, the tense war doubt. While the young Chicago school teacher was patronizing the quaint tearooms, and the more experienced traveler was turning up his nose at the blatantly advertised and disagreeably named launch on the Avon, the "George Washington," the English themselves were awaiting news from Downing Street where the Cabinet was deliberating.

In this strange atmosphere the summer festival began. Stratford is the one place in the world where Shakespeare should be most enthusiastically celebrated. As far back as the great actor Garrick, a commemorative series of events was arranged, including everything from drama through horse-racing to fireworks. It became apparent in subsequent years that the only way to commemorate a dramatist was to perform his plays. Intermittent seasons were attempted until 1873 when the Memorial Theatre was erected beside the charming little Avon, on which the youngster Shakespeare must have sailed his chip boats.

Every spring, in April, the festival opens with the unfurling in High Street of the flags of the various nations by their ambassadors. Then follows the floral procession to the church. Thousands of visitors walk to the little graveyard, enter the chancel of Trinity Church, and drop upon the grave some flower lovingly mentioned by the poet. The series of plays which follows has been gradually extended until now it covers practically four weeks. Some four years ago the August season was inaugurated to continue the entire month.

In August, 1914, the little Memorial Theatre (it seats only 950, counting even the peculiar little window-seats) had been sold out for every performance, but with the prospect of war, cancellations began to pour in until the box-office reminded one of funeral parlors.

Twelve plays had been announced—six comedies, three histories, three tragedies. This surprising versatility is really nothing

to what the company can do and has done. It has produced all the plays of Shakespeare except three. The altogether disagreeable *All's Well That Ends Well*, the slaughter-house *Titus Andronicus*, and the peculiar *Troilus and Cressida* have not been given. Thirty-four out of thirty-seven plays! How many of the entire number have most Americans read? A dozen? That's putting the average rather high, though it should be soon reached because of the interest stimulated by the Shakespeare tercentenary celebration here.

One year the company inserted Marlowe's *Edward II* in its proper chronological place, and gave all the plays on English history. From the troubles of King John down to the baptism of the infant Elizabeth in *Henry VIII*, English history passed before the audiences in glorious poetry and noble acting. The spectators may have found variety in the contrasting characters, in the comic relief, but the people behind the footlights suffered from the monotony of royal life. They were stiff from kingly strides and sore from wearing armor. The scene-shifters grew just as tired, for they received no applause, not even a glimpse of the audience. Finally, toward the end of the series, as some thwarted sovereign sank to his eternal sleep, one disgusted stage-hand fervently exclaimed, "Thank Gawd, Bill, there's another bloomin' king dead."

A comedy and a history had been performed when, on August 4, England declared war against Germany. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was scheduled, but in its place was substituted the most glorious outburst of patriotism the stage has ever offered a nation, *Henry V*.

When Richard Mansfield offered this chronicle in America, there were two features in the play—the glorious poetry of the choruses before the acts, and the spectacular conqueror element of the king himself. At Stratford, to the general disappointment, these bursts of patriotism were omitted entirely. This was a greater loss than ever before, for English patriotism was surging high, and the martial calls of Shakespeare would have thrilled the blood. As it was, the house was tense when Mr. Frank R. Benson, since knighted, appeared before the curtain, begging the audience not to transfer the utterances of the sixteenth century to our

times, not to apply to a sister nation and ally the sentiments uttered by an invader in 1415, but to wait until the end of the evening for the expression of Britain's true feeling for France. That last scene came. Gallant King Henry had wooed and won the pert and coy Katherine; the Queen of France delivered, with more feeling than she had ever experienced before, the prayer, to which every listener added, "Amen."

So be there 'twixt your Kingdoms such a spousal,  
That never may ill offence, or fell jealousy,  
Which troubles oft the bed of blessed marriage,  
Thrust in between the faction of these Kingdoms,  
To make divorce of their incorporate league;  
That English may as French, French Englishmen,  
Receive each other. God speed this Amen!

Naturally the histories would contain more appeals to martial and patriotic feelings than the comedies. One would declare on general ideas that the tragedies would offer none at all. In this he would be entirely mistaken. Another mistake was significantly corrected at Stratford. So many people know passages from the plays that frequently they watch the acting and take the words for granted. *Hamlet* gave the surprise. We had speculated on the "cuts" that would be made. Mr. E. H. Sothorn once told me that every omission from his *Hamlet* had been objected to by letter from all over this Continent, "but," he continued, "what shall I do? We can't keep people out of their beds all night."

At Stratford the long speech by Polonius advising Laertes of how to act in Paris was retained intact. No actor expects applause until he reaches the end—for everyone has recited the proverbs in school and knows them perfectly. "Neither a borrower, nor a lender be," "Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice," "The apparel oft proclaims the man." But that week England had declared war, after a long and anxious wait. So when old gray beard Polonius delivered,

Beware  
Of entrance to a quarrel; but being in  
Bear't, that the opposed may beware of thee,

like a thunder-clap came the applause, rocking the theater with its unanimity and power, and startling the actor out of his part completely.

As the days passed the dramatic interest became more and more merged into the military. It is true that lectures were delivered and listened to. English folk-dancing by Mr. Cecil Sharp was still studied by the attractive young girls who, in their blue and brown knee-length tunics, unaffectedly walked the Stratford streets in such numbers that one newly arrived American asked me where the bathing-beach was. The plays were given almost as announced. But we all felt that more serious matters would call soon. One performance was omitted entirely to let the theater be used for a mass-meeting. Money was offered the seat-holders, but no one claimed the refund, and the money was forwarded to the Red Cross Society. Since Stratford is the center of the hunting district, cavalry troops began to arrive every night to move on "somewhere" next day. Thousands of horses were purchased for later distribution. A bred hunter ridden in by its mistress was commandeered by the officials, a sum paid over, and the former owner drove back home in a green grocer's cart.

The young Englishman home from China suddenly changed his route so that, instead of going across Russia and Siberia, he should come over on our steamer and rush to San Francisco with a few hours' margin to board a ship for Japan; visitors from the Continent reported for identification to the Town Hall; Americans became panic-stricken as sailing after sailing was canceled; the Stratfordians looked ruefully at the departures, entirely unbalanced by the arrivals, for the little village exists entirely on the April and August dramatic-season visitors; Mr. Benson, star of the company, came rushing in to Sunday breakfast with me from rifle practice, and was reminded during the meal that "service at the barracks was to be at eleven, sir."

It was a transformed Stratford-on-Avon.